Lakes, Ponds and Reservoirs

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Catfish in Iowa Lakes

Publicly-owned lakes provide much recreational enjoyment to the residents of Iowa. Six out of ten residents surveyed indicated that they visited an Iowa lake from 5 to 18 times per year. Fishing is one of the many reasons for these visits, and channel catfish are in the top three fish sought by Iowa anglers. In most small Iowa lakes catfish do not reproduce successfully due to predation by other fish and need to be restocked to sustain their numbers. In the past the Iowa DNR stocked over 300,000 channel catfish annually into our lakes. Due to recent efforts of our hatchery personnel to increase the size of these fish, only half as many catfish are available for stocking each year. Requests for catfish from our lake managers have out-paced our hatcheries production capability, so we are working to find ways to wisely appropriate these fish for anglers across the state.

We are now working to find representative measures of catfish population status so DNR fisheries managers are better equipped to make timely decisions on how many and how often catfish need to be stocked into public waters. Management and research teams around the State have been doing intensive sampling of catfish in area lakes to provide data that are being used to develop decision guidelines for stocking strategies to meet management goals. So far we are finding that increasing numbers of fish in our nets is reflective of a higher number in the lake. As obvious as that seems, it is an important baseline to establish. This will be one measure that lake managers can quickly determine. Other measures we are looking at to classify lake populations of channel catfish include size distribution and growth of these fish. Of course nothing is as simple as we would like, and we are working to determine what factors at each lake are adding variability to the data we have collected.

One of these factors is the two size classes of catfish that have been stocked in our lakes. The smaller had been raised in our hatcheries for two growing seasons, and the larger was raised for the first year in our hatcheries and the growing season of the second year in floating cages in lakes near the waters where the fish were to be stocked. Our results show that on average those lakes stocked with larger fish have a larger population available to anglers. This is one indication that our recent move to increase the size of hatchery-stocked fish is a good one. Other potential sources of variability are water clarity and predator density of stocked waters.

As much as possible we want to stock catfish where people will fish for them, and provide catfish anglers with the potential to catch what they prefer. Angler surveys conducted during the past 3 years indicate that not all lakes have the same catfish angler effort per lake acre. There appear to be two groups of lakes; lakes where many people fish for and catch catfish, and lakes were very few people are fishing for or catching catfish. These same surveys indicate that most people fishing for channel catfish don't care if their catch is a trophy—they want more action from pan-sized fish. Though these individual lake surveys provide excellent data, they are expensive and time-consuming. To quickly and economically gather more information, we are gearing up to do a statewide mailing survey to identify many of our most popular catfish lakes and determine preferences of catfish anglers. With this information our managers will have more information they need to focus our limited resources where they will produce the most for the angling public.